

Mark Shields

Cotton Mather Democrats

The American Puritan has been described as an unhappy soul who lives in mortal dread that somebody, somewhere—right now—might be enjoying himself. One secret to the survival of the Democratic Party is that the Democrats shrewdly did not compete with their political adversaries—the Federalists, the Whigs, the Republicans—for the voting allegiance of the American Puritans. More reliably numerous and better company than those New England moralists, concluded the Democrats, were citizens whose families hadn't come over on the Mayflower and who enjoyed a cold beer, a warm laugh and, perhaps, a game of chance and even a friendly dance.

But now, in their calls for increased federal taxes on beer, tobacco and gasoline to reduce the budget deficit, some elected Democrats choose to forget their party's proud tradition and to forsake their party's working-class members.

There remains one consolation for Democrats advocating hikes in the "sin taxes" on smoking, drinking and driving: their conversion to virtue is applauded by contemporary American Puritans.

What has happened to the Democrats? Have they forgotten how their founders opposed Alexander Hamilton's heavy excise tax on whiskey, which was then almost exclusively consumed by the Irish and Scottish? Hamilton had the strong support of New England Puritans, who were delighted to discourage liquor consumption by the lower classes while painlessly providing for the public treasury.

The sin tax on whiskey may have made the Puritans happy, but it helped make the Scotch-Irish into Democrats. Later waves of immigrants—Germans, Irish Catholics, Poles, Russians—found the Democratic Party more hospitable to their festivals and fun than they did the party of the joyless.

The Puritan impulse is reflected in the case for increasing taxes on cigarettes and beer. Indifferent to the contradiction in their argument, sin-tax supporters insist that higher taxes on smoking and drinking will mean a) more taxes collected and b) less smoking and drinking (since both will cost the consumer more), which means a healthier and more virtuous America.

Disregarded by such advocates is the revered Democratic tradition of basing taxes on progressivity, on one's ability to pay. Sin taxes on tobacco, gasoline and beer ignore that principle. For example, American families earning between \$10,000 and \$30,000 a year spend as a percentage of their income more than twice as much on gasoline as do those earning over \$50,000. Somebody who has to drive 50 miles each way between home and work is probably not doing leveraged buyouts. Long daily commutes

by passenger car are more often a factor of economic imperative than aesthetics.

Cigarette smoking is increasingly, almost exclusively, a practice of working-class and blue-collar Americans of modest income who never went to college. Granted, these folks do not have a battery of Washington lawyer-lobbyists on retainer, but is that any reason to raise their taxes?

Americans earning \$20,000 or less a year spend, as a percentage of their income, more than three times as much on beer as do Americans earning \$75,000 a year. While there is no empirical data available, it's still a good bet that the higher-income group smartly spends at least 10 times as much on bottled water imported from France. Yet no Democrat is urging a dollar-a-six-pack levy on Perrier.

To urge more and bigger taxes on smokes and suds smacks of a desire to save people from themselves—in spite of

themselves. That's exactly what the resident party of American Puritans strove to do for every group of immigrants from the Old World by banning Sunday picnics and dancing and by closing down the neighborhood taverns. It cannot be reassuring for Democrats to look in the mirror and see Cotton Mather glowering back at them.

When did the Democrats plunge into the fatal error that somehow it is acceptable to be rich, virtuous to be poor, and that the only sin is to be a member of the middle class? Such folly has left the stench of snobishness at too many Democratic gatherings where the working American is seen as neither the legendary Joe Hill nor the admirable Norma Rae but instead as the bigoted Archie Bunker.

It's time Democrats remember who they are, where they come from, and that taxes ought to be based on the ability to pay.

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